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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000672

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BA](#) [POL](#)
SUBJECT: AL-WIFAQ HEAD SHAIKH ALI SALMAN PESSIMISTIC ABOUT
DEMOCRATIC PROGRESS

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) In a farewell meeting with the Ambassador, Al-Wifaq head Shaikh Ali Salman expressed frustration with his experience in Parliament since becoming an MP late last year, saying that the current system stifles debate, makes it difficult to pass laws (not to mention constitutional changes), and limits parliament's oversight capability. He urged development of an action plan to guide the way forward to a more representative democracy. Al-Wifaq MP Khalil Al-Marzooq suggested that the U.S. urge the GOB to work toward a more transparent election system (including doing away with general polling stations) and combat government corruption more effectively. On the issue of mistrust between the Shia community and the government, Salman said that people have been talking about this mistrust for 20 years, and what is needed is concrete action to build trust to move forward together. At the same time, he said that sectarianism was worse now than in the past, extending to the roots of the two communities. The Ambassador stressed that the USG and President Bush remain committed to encouraging continued democratic reform in Bahrain and the region, reminded Salman of the various democracy-related programs we have conducted in Bahrain, and assured that the new Ambassador would continue to support democracy in Bahrain. End summary.

12. (C) Meeting with the Ambassador at its new office for its Council of Representative (COR) members, leading Shia political society Al-Wifaq secretary general and head of its bloc in parliament Shaikh Ali Salman sought assistance from the U.S. to urge the Bahrain government to speed up the pace of democratic reform. Expressing frustration, he said that before becoming an MP he thought he would be able to accomplish more within the parliament, but now feels he cannot even speak out on issues of concern because of a rigid parliamentary system that stifles adequate open discussion. "We won't achieve anything through the parliament," he said pessimistically. "The whole process is under the hand of the King and the Prime Minister. They can stop all efforts we make. It is just a show." Salman said that he reflects every day on whether he is doing the right thing by participating and whether he should leave the parliament. Only through the encouragement of his Al-Wifaq colleagues has he persisted even this long. He said that parliament needed to be further empowered through constitutional changes to include increased oversight powers to combat corruption. He said that under the current system, MPs are not able to initiate action against any government official even if there are signs of involvement in corruption.

13. (C) The Ambassador asked Salman what Al-Wifaq would like

the USG to do. Salman suggested that there needs to be an action plan that will guide a more transparent way forward, leading to a more representative democracy. He said that the community cannot wait another 15-20 years for there to be meaningful change; there needs to be significant offerings to the people soon. Fellow MP and Legislative Affairs Committee head Khalil Al-Marzooq raised the issue of the recently released TIP rankings, which lowered Bahrain to Tier 3, saying that the GOB responds quickly when pressure of this sort is applied by the U.S. If there were similar pressure applied in the area of democratic reform, the GOB would respond, he maintained. The Ambassador pointed out that the comparison was problematic because, on the issue of trafficking, the Government is fully committed to taking action and there is no fundamental disagreement on the pace or scope of action needed. On democratic reform, the Government contends that it is managing the process at the proper pace and is much more sensitive about perceived "interference" in internal affairs. That said, the Ambassador reaffirmed that the USG and President Bush remain strongly committed to encouraging greater democratic reform in Bahrain and the region, reminded Salman of the broad range of MEPI programs the USG has sponsored in support of democracy, and assured that the new Ambassador would remain a strong supporter of democracy in Bahrain.

14. (C) Al-Marzooq outlined three specific areas in which the U.S. could push for greater democratic reform. First, the U.S. should urge the GOB to work toward a more transparent election system, including doing away with the general polling stations, which were seen to be a source of manipulation of the election. Second, it should encourage the government to combat corruption by enforcing existing laws and being willing to investigate allegations of

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corruption rather than protecting those against whom allegations have been leveled. And third, it should recognize that Bahrain is not really going in the right direction in terms of representative democracy. He said that under the 1973 constitution, 75 percent of parliamentary seats were elected by the people and the rest were appointed, but now there are only 50 percent who are elected (the King-appointed Shura Council, or upper house, has the same number of seats, 40, as the elected COR). Fellow Al-Wifaq MP Jalal Fairouz commented that the people feel they are living in the 18th century as they watch the King and PM control all aspects of the economy and politics in the country.

15. (C) The Ambassador raised the issue of mistrust between the Shia community and the government. Salman said that people have raised the issue of mistrust for 20 years, but no one has taken any concrete steps to build trust. "We can continue to merely talk about the lack of trust, but we don't actually get anywhere. We need to take real action to build trust and move forward together." Al-Marzooq said that Al-Wifaq is in the difficult position of being accused of being loyal to Iran as Shiites, but on the other hand, it is also accused of being supported by the U.S. (Comment: This may be a reference to previous NDI programs that were alleged by some to be focused solely on empowering the opposition, read Shia.) Salman stated that sectarianism is worse now than in the past, extending to the roots of both the Sunni and Shia communities. People used to reject sectarianism and say they were brothers first, but now there are continual attempts to divide the Bahraini community. Referring to loyalty, Salman said, "We are Shia, and we do have religious ties to Iran but not political ties. We wish people would believe us."

16. (C) Comment: Ali Salman and his colleagues were in a strikingly pessimistic mood during this meeting. The frustration no doubt reflects both the slow progress addressing issues of concern in the parliament and also recent criticism he has received from constituents during a series of open meetings conducted by Al-Wifaq. And there is

no doubt that Ali Salman faces a daunting challenge as he maneuvers between hard-line Shia critics who have rejected his attempt to work within the system and the Government and its Sunni supporters who do not fully trust Al-Wifaq and its intentions. Although he talked of possible resignation, this does not seem likely at this time. Resignation would be a tacit admission that what the Haq Movement advocates, total rejection of the current political system, has been the right course all along. Salman has invested much political capital in Al-Wifaq's participation, and his colleagues will do all they can to prevent his departure. And in urging support for a more transparent, representative electoral system, Salman and his colleagues were tacitly acknowledging the importance of preparing the ground for the 2010 elections, an indication that their preference is to stay within the system.

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